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# REFLECTIONS IN A SWAMP

"And He will delight in the fear of the LORD (Isaiah 11:3).

I, Professor Seismo,[1] am exploring a large swamp located in the southern United States. What follows are the handwritten notes of my discoveries.

DAY 1: My hands are trembling uncontrollably, which makes it all the harder to journal. The start of my swamp exploration this afternoon seemed innocent enough, but only a few hours into my hike I fell upon a strange pool of sticky, black mud. It was necessary to wade through a pool of what seemed like ordinary water in order to reach ground that was more suitable for foot travel. Little did I know that lurking just below the surface was "quick sand." Once my boot was firmly planted in the ooze, I started to slowly sink and I could not stop my descent! For several minutes I experienced sheer horror, thinking I was going to perish. Collecting myself, I cried out to the Lord in prayer, and He then reminded me of Isaiah 43:2, "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you."

Suddenly, as if by some miracle, I noticed a low-hanging cypress branch about two feet overhead. I impulsively grabbed the tree's "outstretched hand" and slowly, painfully pulled myself out of the awful muck. Now that I've made camp for the night, these majestic cypresses give me the impression that they are enormous sentries "watching" over me. Today's events seem to be a premonition of the very real dangers here. Yet there is also beauty and tranquility mixed in — I am now met with a stunning sky of soft orange that is gently transforming into an otherworldly violet hue.

What a strange mix of qualities are presented by this forest — an ominous foreboding mingled with an ineffable peacefulness — especially after my narrow escape. I'm committed to remaining brave in my explorations through the coming days because there looks to be an almost endless treasure of delights pointing me to Christ's glory. But I must not slip into further carelessness, as there are stories of men going insane just a few days after getting lost in the swamp, and some were never heard from again! It's been said that we cannot love or cherish what we do not know, and this seems true of the swamp and the One who created it. Therefore, I remain resolute to explore . . . very carefully.

DAY 2: In southern U.S swamps, the cypress tree (*Taxodium distichum*) fills the role of a keystone species. Rising up 12 to 15 stories from unseen depths, these coniferous beauties seem to project a ghost-like appearance. Many clumps of Spanish moss — an epiphyte [2] — can be found growing on their branches.

Our Lord's design of the cypress is unmatched among all tree species on Earth. The heartwood of the cypress — sometimes known as "wood eternal" — contains a chemical called cypressene, which is a natural preservative. Cypressene makes its wood extremely resistant to decay by fungi and termites. This feature seems essential for survival in such a wet environment. For years, its timber has been prized by locals for this rot resistance. Grave markers made from cypress wood have been known to last 160 years, and cypress shingles can survive up to 250 years. The woody framework of these trees is also legendary for its flexibility. Hurricane-force winds can bend a cypress horizontally 90° without breaking it. The tree literally springs back to an upright position once the hurricane has passed.

The largest cypress trees remind me of medieval cathedrals with buttressed outer walls. (Some cypress probably started growing before the advent of the Middle Ages.)[3] It is thought that the flaring of the trunk helps provide the tree stability in water. Along with water tupelo (*Nyssa aquatica*), cypress trees possess "knobs" or pneumatophores. These "knees," as they are also called,

are a part of the root system and stick up out of the water near the tree's base. Their function is not clearly understood, but thought to help the tree release carbon dioxide into the air.

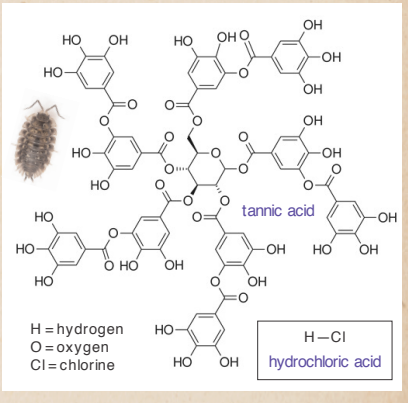
As I feast upon these wonders of the swamp surrounding me, a holy dread again overtakes me as I'm reminded that the fear of God is everywhere reflected in it. But instead of overwhelming me with an impulse to flee, I am again experiencing an unexplainable peace (Acts 9:31). I'm tempted to conclude that the greatest peace we can experience here on Earth is found where the greatest fear of God is on display . . . as one might feel in the eye of a hurricane.

But what is godly fear? It can't simply be the intensity of emotions that fear produces. I'm convinced in my heart that godly fear — strong or slight — is an apprehension of God that is coupled with peace (and probably much more than peace). But if peace is lacking, then the fear we are experiencing is "slavish," that is, carnal or fleshly.

I'm inclined to think that apart from God's sovereign rule and justice — and the holy terror that walks with them — there can be no peace. Where the fear of the Lord reigns, there will be ultimate and true tranquility. Surely, the Puritan pastor Thomas Manton was right when he taught that godly fear is a grace from our Lord to be exercised as one uses his lungs to breathe. Never have I been reminded of such truth as in this swamp.

DAY 3: Another plant that adds to the otherworldly appearance of the swamp is duckweed, the world's smallest flowering plant. Duckweed typically grows on the surface of water, forming an ethereal carpet of aqua-green. This beautiful growth is not only striking to observe, but helps protect the swamp as well. Duckweed is to the swamp as our liver is to our body. Collectively, millions of these tiny floating plants help clean and detoxify the water of any poisons or excess chemicals that may be introduced into this ecosystem.

Just below this layer of duckweed, the water is stained reddish brown, giving it the look of black tea. Our Lord Jesus uses dead leaves and bark that have fallen into the swamp to create this "blackwater" appearance. His steeping of the water changes not only its color but also its chemistry. Released organic acids can lower the pH to 3.0 — this is equivalent to the acidity of vinegar (acetic acid) — adding to the strangeness of this place. And I am struck by the complexity of these organic acids. When I compare the molecular structure of just one of these acids (tannic acid) with the acid found in my stomach (hydrochloric acid) I'm amazed. . . .




Jesus could have used a much simpler acid to acidify swamp water. But His choice of several such organic acids helps to demonstrate the unfathomable complexity of design He has sewn into this ecosystem (Romans 11:33). Why did He acidify the water in the first place? Certainly Christ has fashioned many plants and animals that can thrive here, but I have subsequently learned that many more cannot, finding

its acidic environment too formidable. This is one way God limits the number of organisms that may live in the swamp.

At the bottom of the "tea cup" of brewed water is a layer of muddy sediment and slowly-decomposing leaf litter. Within this world of muck and detritus live countless small invertebrates. One sample I took of the swamp bottom the other day suggests that as many as 6,000 "creepy crawlies" reside in just one square yard (square meter) of mud. This included crayfish, clams, worms, snails, shrimp, amphipods, and a whole host of insect larvae. This is no place for bare feet!

Dobsonfly larva

All of these alien-looking creatures "speak" of a Creator who is other-worldly in His holiness. This truth is central to the Bible: "It is the LORD of hosts whom you should regard as holy. And He shall be your fear, and He shall be your dread" (Isaiah 8:13). "'Do you not fear Me?' declares the LORD. 'Do you not tremble in My presence?'" (Jeremiah 5:22). And why is it that we should fear the Lord? Verses 22-24 explain: He is our holy Creator. Nature, and I think especially this swamp, is whispering to us all, "The Creator is fearful; fear Him in His holiness!"

The most abundant invertebrate, and the greatest portion of the biomass of southern swamps, is the crayfish. The vast Atchafalaya Swamp in Louisiana has 29 species of crayfish, and crayfish make up one-third of the animal biomass of the state. But why did God supply swamps with such a large number of these creatures? Possibly because many animals – birds, raccoons, large fish, turtles, red foxes, muskrats, water snakes – depend upon crayfish as a source of food and energy.

DAY 4: I've read that a swamp can overwhelm visitors, especially city folk not accustomed to the sheer volume and density of its vegetation and wildlife. I certainly have been astonished by the amount of life Christ Jesus has placed here. Like the tropical rainforests of the world, the many organisms found in this unique ecosystem proclaim that our Creator is the Lord of Life (1 Timothy 6:13). As a result, I've learned to focus on a few things at a time. Take floral scents: There are so many sweet and wonderful smells emanating from the swamp's countless flowers, that I'm

Clockwise: swamp lily (upper left), golden club, pickerelweed, ghost orchid, cardinal flower (center)

trying to enjoy them one sniff at a time. Flowers frequently pierce the ubiquitous green here with all the colors of the rainbow.

So many things contribute to the swamp's ominous reputation, and this includes its flesh-eating plants — bladderworts, sundews, and numerous pitcher plants. (I haven't found any Venus fly traps; apparently they are confined to the coastal swamps and bogs of the Carolinas.) Fortunately for me, the biggest prey that these carnivorous plants consume are small frogs and mice, though they usually dine on insects and spiders. But why did our Lord Jesus make them this way? I've subsequently learned that the soil in most swamps is low in nutrients, especially nitrogen and phosphorus, so these much-needed meals of flesh provide the plants with essential nutrients, a gift from the caring hands of our triune God.

DAY 5: Without a doubt, reflections of God's glory are woven into this unique ecosystem. But the swamp continues to remind me that among His attributes, His terrifying character is chiefly represented — a character we can both adore and revere with holy trembling. And I am struck again and again by examples of Christ's beauty that accompany the frightful things here. This beauty is sometimes subtle and a sharp eye is needed to see it. This makes me think that there must be a natural tie-in between beauty and fear. I've experienced a taste of this fear when meeting someone who is handsome or beautiful, or someone of true nobility. At that moment, I'm often beset with anxiety and am usually left with a loss for words. But is it human beauty and dignity that make me nervous, or am I experiencing the fear of God — the God who created this loveliness and dignity in the first place? I think it's the latter because sometimes I am at a similar loss for words describing the beauties of this swamp.

In nature, I have often found that there is a hidden terror in beauty and a hidden beauty in terror. An example of the former can be seen in some of the flowers Jesus has sown into this swamp. These flowers are usually quite beautiful, but not a few are also very dangerous, though you wouldn't know it by looking at them. Many contain chemicals quite toxic if consumed. And as far as hidden beauty in terror, the alligator is a good example. Terrifying as this creature is, it makes an extremely dedicated parent. In this case, the "beauty" of the alligator is not like that of a flower, but it's God's fatherly care shining through the parenting skills of this beast.

Toxic swamp azalea

So, too, we see hidden terror in beauty and hidden beauty in terror on the pages

of Scripture. The Temple was a magnificent place (Psalm 27:4), but it became quite horrifying to Nadab and Abihu when they entered it irreverently (Leviticus 10:1-3). And there are biblical instances when the soil of abject terror has bloomed with God's beauty, as in the case of Ninevah's repentance under the preaching of Jonah (Jonah 3).

My sweet Lord has graciously allowed me to see many reflections of His beauty throughout the world. But I've also discovered that some of the most stunning examples of His created beauty don't come easily. Such is the case of the resplendent orchid flower. Jesus has hidden several exquisite species of orchids in swamps and rainforests all over the world. And it has only been with great difficulty — strenuous hiking through rough terrain and high humidity — that I have observed them in the wild.

Yellow garden spider (Argiope aurantia)

But flowers are not the only things that dazzle the eye in the swamp. Our Lord's birds also communicate His loveliness. It's not hard to be reminded that Christ our Creator is perfect in holiness when we get a glimpse of the pure white of a great egret. Even the spiders here display an alien beauty of their own, although I suspect that some folks might see in these eight-legged creatures more terror than beauty.

Great egret

Day after day I'm glimpsing more and more of this alien loveliness in the swamp and it continues to point me back to the inescapable conclusion: Our beautiful God ought to be feared. If God created the beauty we see in the world around us and the purpose of this beauty is to be the praise of His glory, then our response should be one of godly fear, shouldn't it? "O worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness: fear before Him, all the earth" (Psalm 96:9 KJV). And again, "praise Him for the splendor of His holiness" (2 Chronicles 20:21 NIV). The 18th century pastor, John Gill, commenting on this second verse, says that we should "praise God, who is glorious in holiness, whose beauty lies in His holiness, and who is holy in all His ways and works." Pastor Gill goes on to say, "He is so much the object of the fear of good men, He is called Fear itself" (see Genesis 31:42).4 The swamp is one of His works. So the beauty of the swamp can be said to be set upon the foundation of God's holiness — beauty and fear come together and take center stage here. We can only enjoy them, however, in the

care we take to humble ourselves before our Creator.

DAY 6: As with all ecosystems, our Lord Jesus uses several abiotic factors (water, wind, fire, salt) to mold the swamp environment into what He wants it to be. Swamps may receive water from our Creator's hand via springs or rainfall, or from the overflow of an adjacent lake or river. I've discovered that a typical deepwater swamp, however, should be thought of as a forest with an extremely slow-moving river creeping its way through it. The term "deepwater" is a little misleading though. My depth measurements reveal that this swamp is no more than nine feet (three meters) deep, with an average of two or three feet (one meter).

Ah, there are so many ways God uses swamps to entertain us with His glory! The number one reason houseplants die is from overwatering. Yet here I sit in the midst of a garden perpetually "overwatered" for much of the year, and the swamp plants thrive. Jesus is simply amazing . . . how does He do it? Many plants found in other ecosystems cannot tolerate the level of moisture that the swamp receives; one benefit of this fact is that foreign species of plants are prevented from establishing themselves here.

Sometimes the opposite occurs—drought. But, God uses this to proclaim His goodness as well. Our Lord has placed peat deposits in the soil of most swamps for those times when there is little or no rain. Peat acts as a sponge, retaining moisture for long periods and supplying water to the many moisture-loving plants. At other times, God greatly prolongs a drought and causes a swamp to dry up. He then starts it ablaze using the lightning from a thunderstorm. Fire helps to reduce unwanted species of plants and animals that are attempting to invade the swamp from surrounding ecosystems, again showing us His sovereign goodness.

The presence or absence of salt in the water greatly affects the kind of organisms found in the swamps all over the globe. The southern cypress swamps of the United States are freshwater ecosystems. But many swamps around the world are saltwater wetlands, and display plants and animals designed by God to thrive only in such a mineral-rich environment.

DAY 7: As with any healthy forest, shrubs are common in southern deepwater swamps. These include dwarf palmetto, Virginia willow, sweet pepperbush, spicebush, and possum hawholly. Ground cover consists of

Dwarf palmetto

Virginia creeper, poison ivy, green briers, ferns, St. John's wort, maidencane, and nettle. Nettle can be particular painful if you brush up against it, as I know

all too well. Even the vines appear menacing. Vines are very common and grow mammoth in size. The supplejack vine, like a snake, has the ability to wrap itself around just about any stationary object . . . pretty creepy.

The swamp continues to clearly communicate that God must be feared. This is such a vital message in a world that sadly fears God so little. Because of inherent danger and difficulty, some folks have no desire to explore swamps, and this is understandable. Yet they also miss out on a wealth of delights. There are so many unique reflections of our sweet Lord's character and divine attributes here, and not just those that elicit fear. As I've seen, the swamp proclaims Christ to be our beautiful Prince of Peace. But we can only fully enjoy Him if we embrace His beauty and His peace with holy trembling, and if we accept that the swamp possesses certain unavoidably frightful things.

Surely the Dutch Reformer, Wilhelmus á Brakel, helps to center our thinking when he writes, "Be assured that God will give you a fearful and trembling heart as long as you do not fear Him, so that you will find neither rest nor safety anywhere [else]." We will never know true peace if we try to diminish the terror of who God is in our minds; it will only create anxiety. We need to nurture in our hearts that He is terrifying, and then seek shelter in Him. Pastor á Brakel goes on to say that if we "neglect to thus focus upon the Lord and fear Him continually [we will be] vulnerable to all kinds of sin." So a proper fear of God is also a sure tonic against wickedness. Pastor á Brakel concludes by saying that, "the livelier the fear of God is—the less power will sin have over you. Therefore in the future commit yourself fully to tenderly fear the Lord your God."[5] Amen.

It is this tender fear of my Creator that I am nurturing within this swamp and I want to experience it all the more! My time here is only half over; I look forward to the other things Jesus will show me throughout this ecosystem and, Lord willing, how He will use them to teach me more about Himself.

1 Professor Seismo (SIZE - mo) is a fictitious character.
2 Spanish moss is not a moss at all, but belongs to the bromeliad family. An epiphyte is a plant that lives on another plant without harming it. Orchids are also classified as epiphytes.
3 A giant cypress felled at the beginning of the last century was thought to be 1,600 years old. If so, it started to grow during the time of Athanasius and the Council of Nicea (325 A.D.).
4 John Gill (1697-1771), Commentary on 2 Chronicles.
5 Wilhelmus á Brakel (1635-1711), The Fear of God.

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